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Book Review: *Lost Tracks: Buffalo National Park, 1909-1939* By Jennifer Brower

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BOOK REVIEWS

Lost Tracks: Buffalo National Park, 1909-1939. By Jennifer Brower. Edmonton, AB: AU Press, 2008. vii + 184 pp. Maps, photographs, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 paper.

Buffalo National Park stands as both a high and a low point in the history of the Canadian national park system. In 1908, it was created near Wainwright, Alberta, as a reserve, and soon a park, to house Plains bison being shipped from Montana; the park's existence helped to restore the near-extinct species. The bison population grew too swiftly, in fact, leading to deteriorated range conditions and rampant tuberculosis. In a misguided attempt to alleviate this pressure, the Parks Branch in the 1920s shipped tubercular Plains bison to Wood Buffalo National Park, consequently infecting and hybridizing the pure-bred wood bison there. With its own range still depleted and its bison still diseased, Buffalo National Park was closed in 1939, the land turned over to the Department of National Defense.

Jennifer Brower's *Lost Tracks* does a creditable job of tracing this fleeting history of what was intended to be a permanent place. Relying largely on correspondence and reports from the Parks Branch's archival record, she details what park administrators and wildlife personnel were thinking at every step along the way. Perhaps because the bison had come from private herds before being

shipped to this new enclosed park and were perceived to need considerable initial management to ensure survival, staff never reached the point of thinking of them as wildlife, as Brower nicely shows. They were more like ranch animals, and the experiments in their commercialization and crossbreeding sprang from that. *Lost Tracks* is also strong in arguing that Canada's major motivation in saving the bison in the first place, and saving as many as it did, was a spirit of rivalry with the United States; bison would help showcase Canada as a nation rich in natural resources. An offer to purchase more bison in 1914 led one civil servant to muse that "the Dominion acquiring the last large herd of good buffalo left in the United States [would] thus not only [improve] its own herd, but [leave] the United States that much the poorer."

The book is not without flaws. It could certainly use a map locating the long-closed park in the greater West (Wainwright is southeast of Edmonton, close to the Saskatchewan border). It might have offered a less Ottawa-centered portrait of the park by including more local and oral history. Its thematic chapter structure tends to dilute the impact of the park's strong overall narrative: description of the relocation of bison to Wood Buffalo National Park is split over three chapters, for example, and Buffalo's eventual closure is passed over with extraordinary speed. And its simple thesis, that decisions related to Buffalo National Park "were defined and shaped by the cultural atmosphere of the early 20th century," is unsatisfying, particularly given that relevant issues in that cultural atmosphere go unexplored, such as the 1920s societal fear of bovine tuberculosis because of its milk-borne link to nonpulmonary tuberculosis in humans.

Still, *Lost Tracks* merits reading by anyone interested in the history of national parks or wildlife in the West. A ghost park, even more than a ghost town, serves as a healthy reminder of the risk in assuming any place's permanence. **Alan MacEachern**, *Department of History, University of Western Ontario*.